



The Four Dhams

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"Dham" means "Abode". There are four dhams in four directions of India which are believed to be the abodes of Hindu gods, and the holiest places of pilgrimage. The four dhams at the four corners of India symbolize the essential unity of India's spiritual traditions and values. To the north is Badrinath, to the west Dwarka, to the south Rameshwaram and to the east is Puri. Each of the four dhams is a citadel of ancient temples and religious monuments, with one most significant temple as its distinguishing landmark.

BADRINATH

Badrinath is at a height of 10,400 feet above sea-level in the Garhwal Mountains, a part of the larger Himalayas, in the state of Uttaranchal. Built in early ninth century AD, the Badrinath temple is one of the most revered Hindu shrines of India.

The Badrinath temple is located between the two mountain ranges of Nar and Narayan, with the Neelkanth peak in the background. The presiding deity at the Badrinath temple is Shri Badrinath (Vishnu). The Badrinath temple stands in a beautiful valley on the bank of River Alakananda. The origins of the Badrinath temple may be traced to Adi Shankaracharya (8th century). In the 8th century AD Adi

Sankaracharya came to Badri and restored the ancient Badrinath idol from the Narad Kund and consecrated it in a cave near Tapt Kund. The present temple was built by the Garhwal rulers. Tapt Kund, the hot water spring with natural curative properties believed to be the abode of Lord Agni, faces the shrine. The pilgrims take a holy dip in the Tapt Kund before entering the temple. The temple remains closed from October to April due to the winter snow, when temperatures fall to sub-zero degrees.

There are four other shrines (dedicated to Lord Vishnu) near Badrinath shrine. They are Yogadhyan Badri, Bhavishya Badri, Bridha Badri and Adi Badri. Not far from the Badrinath temple is the Hemkund Lake. According to legends, Guru Govind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, meditated on the banks of this Lake. The other places of worship in Badrinath are Gupt kashi (Ardh -Narisvara and Viswanath temples), Kedarnath temple, Vyas Gufa and Ganesha Gufa (where saint Vyas is said to have dictated the Mahabharata to Ganesha).

DWARKA

Dwarka, situated on the west coast of Gujarat on the shore of the Arabian Sea, was the seat of Sri Krishna after He quit Mathura, His



maternal home, to come and reign here. It is said that Lord Krishna, after slaying Kansa, left his abode at Mathura and travelled with the entire Yadava community to the coast of Saurashtra where he founded a town and named it Swarnadwarika. Vajranabh, Lord Krishna's successor and great grandson, is believed to have built the present temple Dwarkanath, also called Trilok Sundar. It is said that the temple was erected in one night by a supernatural agency, under Vajranabh's direction. Legend has it that when dying, Lord Krishna asked his devotees to leave Swarnadwarika so that the sea could engulf it. Until this day, Lord Krishna's city lies buried under the sea. Excavations have revealed that the sea swallowed five settlements, the present-day Dwarka being the sixth in line.

The temple of Dwarkadheesh, also known as Jagat Mandir, is built on the north bank of the

Gomti creek. The temple dates back to 2,500 years. Sixty columns support the roof of the audience hall of the Jagat Mandir. The main temple is five-storey high with the lavishly carved conical spire rising to a height of 157 feet.

Among the large number of temples belonging to different periods in the history of Dwarka, the most popular with pilgrims is the temple of Rukmini, Lord Krishna's wife, who is considered an incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty. This small temple is an architectural masterpiece. The temple walls are decorated with beautiful paintings depicting Rukmini's pastimes with Krishna. This temple is dating back to the 12th century.

The story behind this temple is that one day, Durvasa Muni, who was known as a saint who could be easily angered, was invited by Lord Krishna and his wife, Rukmini, to dinner. When a person is invited to dinner, etiquette dictates that the host should not eat until the guest has been satisfied. On the way to dinner, Rukmini became thirsty and asked Krishna for help. Krishna then put his foot in the ground and the Ganges water flowed forth from the earth. As Rukmini was drinking the water, however, Durvasa turned and saw her drinking without his permission. He became angry and cursed her to live apart from Lord Krishna. That is why Krishna's temple is in the town and hers is located outside the town.

RAMESHWARAM

Rameshwaram is a town in Ramanathapuram district in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is located on an island separated from mainland by the Pamban channel and is less than 40 kilometres from the Jaffna Peninsula of Sri Lanka. Together with Kashi, it is considered to be one of the holiest places of Hindu pilgrimage.



Rameshwaram is significant for the Hindus because it is, firstly, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, and secondly, it is said in the scriptures that a pilgrimage to Varanasi to pay homage to Lord Vishwanath is incomplete without also paying homage to Lord Ranganatha at Rameshwaram. Rameshwaram is called the "Varanasi of the South".

The presiding deity here is in the form of a Linga with the name Sri Ramanatha Swamy. Different rulers built the Ramanatha Swamy Temple over a period of time starting from the 12th century. The temple comprises forty wells where the taste of the water of each well is different from the other. The grandest part of the temple is the corridor said to be the longest in the world. The outer wing of the corridor measures 690 ft in the east-west direction and 435 ft in the north-south direction. There are a total number of 1212 pillars or columns each sculptured to a similar profile and these frame the corridor on either side. The height of this corridor is 22 ft.

According to the Puranas, the sages and 'rishis', assembled in Rameshwaram to receive Rama and Sita on their way from Lanka to Ajodhya, advised Rama that as he had killed Ravana, a brahmin, he should atone for his sin of 'brahmahatya' by performing a purificatory rite in front of a Lingam. As there was no Lingam available, Rama asked Hanuman to obtain one from Lord Shiva himself from Mount Kailash. Hanuman went to Mount Kailash and sat in prayer to Lord Shiva requesting for a Sivalingam. Days passed and Hanuman had not returned. As the auspicious time was approaching, Sita moulded a Sivalingam out of sand and Rama performed his purificatory rite in front of this Lingam. Later Hanuman arrived with his Lingam given by Lord Shiva and was dejected to find

that his efforts were in vain. Lord Rama seeing his dejection told him to throw away the Lingam made out of sand and to install the Lingam given to him. Hanuman then tried to lift the Sivalingam already installed but could not move it. So Rama advised him to install his Sivalingam near the one already there and requested all his followers to worship this Lingam first before worshipping the Lingam installed by him. So this practice continues until this day as the devotees first offer prayers to this Lingam from Mount Kailash as Visvanathar before offering prayers to Lord Ramanathaswamy.

One of the most significant mythological landmarks in Rameshwarpuram is the Gandhamardhan Parvat (a hill) on top of which Rama's footprint is still found embedded.

Sethu Karai is a place 22 km before the island of Rameshwaram from where God Ram built a Floating Stone Bridge "Ramasethu" till Rameshwaram that further continued from Dhanushkodi in Rameshwaram till Talaimannar in Sri Lanka as mentioned in the great Hindu epic Ramayana. The ruins of the Ramasethu are submerged under the sea as shot from Gemini 1 satellite of NASA in 2004.

PURI

Puri is a small coastal town of Orissa, situated on the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal, about sixty kilometers from the capital city of Bhubaneswar. The resident deity at the main temple of this dham is Lord Jagannath (Lord of the Universe). He is present together with His elder brother Balabhadra and His sister Subhadra.

The temple, dating back to the twelfth century, was built by an Oriya king Chodagangadeva but legend has it that it has been



there since time immemorial. The temple is a huge tall structure and dominates the seaside town. The distinct identity of the icons of the temple is that all the deities are handleless. Legend has it that Vishwakarma Himself carved the idols out of wood. When the time came to make the idols Vishwakarma ordered for special wood and went into the temple. He stipulated that He would close the doors of the temple and would remain inside

till the idols were ready. Before that time no one was to enter the temple. Unfortunately, moved by the impatience of his queen, the king had the doors opened before Vishwakarma came out. When they went in they found that the God had carved all the idols up to their elbows. He was about to put on the hands but this was not to be as Vishwakarma angrily went away from there and was never seen again! So the unfinished idols had to be set in the temple and worshipped. So Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are handleless.

The idols are newly carved out of wood from specially-grown Neem trees every 12 to 19 years according to the lunar calendar. Another unique feature of the Puri Jagannath Temple is the Ratha Yatra. The three deities are boarded onto very large wooden chariots and drawn by stout ropes by millions of devotees who gather in Puri at this time to participate in one of the holiest rituals in Hinduism.

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